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Aids to Bible Readers.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

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The Readers.—The Epistle.—Analysis.

THE series of papers, to which I have been asked to contribute the one on *Hebrews*, is intended to deal with each epistle as a contribution to the history and literature of the New Testament church. This being so, there are many interesting problems in the epistle before us which we must regretfully pass by, and must concentrate our attention on the circumstances of the readers, and the manner in which the epistle meets those circumstances.

The Readers.—According to the heading of all existing copies, these were “Hebrews”—not, however, in the narrower sense of that word, as antagonistic to Grecian civilization and culture; for in that case, they would not have welcomed an epistle written in Greek and abounding in quotations from the LXX—but as equivalent to Jews, descendants of Abraham the Hebrew. Probably the name also connotes residence in Palestine. The epistle was written to a definite church, with a creditable past (6: 10; 10: 32), to whom the writer hopes to be restored, 13: 23. There is not the slightest allusion to Gentile converts in the church, nor indeed to Gentile antagonism from outside. Had there been Gentiles in the church, the relations between them and the Jews could scarcely have escaped mention. We have before us, then, a local community consisting solely of Jewish Christians. Some of the members had been converted many years before, and “ought for the time to have been teachers” (5: 12), but even they do not seem to have heard the gospel direct from Christ, but from his disciples, who had been enabled to work many miracles among them, and to dispense the gifts of the Holy Ghost (2: 3, 4). These, their first leaders, were now dead, however, having had a glorious passage from this world to the next (13: 7). At one time the church “endured a great contest of sufferings” (10: 32), but inasmuch as that occurred “in the earlier days,” needing now an effort to recollect, we infer that since then, until recently, the state of things had been more peaceful. Formerly, some of their number had

been "in bonds," and had endured "the spoiling of their possessions ;" being, in fact, "made a gazing-stock by reproaches and afflictions." At that time there was genuine enthusiasm in the church. The sufferers "joyfully welcomed" spoliation, and the rest of the church sympathized with them, courageously claimed connection with them, and shared their losses (10:33, 34). They delighted to minister to the saints, and their zeal in Christian work and their love to needy brethren were such as God could not righteously forget (6:10).

But latterly, a decided *change for the worse* had come over them. Persecution and suffering were again threatening, and they had lost their zeal to withstand them. They were called upon to bear the reproach of Christ (13:13). They had "need of patience" (10:36). They were threatened with worldly loss (12:16). Some of them were in bonds (13:3). They were enduring divine fatherly chastisement (12:7). Their Christian course was a hard race, calling for patient endurance, cross-bearing, and a readiness to think lightly of shame (12:1, 2). And their zeal was not equal to the strain made upon it. They were still somewhat mindful of Christ's poor (6:10), but their brotherly love was inconstant, and their hospitality waning (13:1, 2); while their sympathy with those in bonds was a thing of the past (10:34; 13:3). In view of possible disasters, they were growing avaricious, and distrustful of God's providing care (13:5). They were getting out of touch with the past. Their former leaders failed to inspire their admiration and imitation (6:12; 13:7) and their present leaders were treated with scant courtesy, if not mistrust (13:17). They had become "dull of hearing" (5:11), sluggishly insensible to the truths which once thrilled them (6:12). The hands once so industrious for Christ were hanging limply down, and the knees once so robust were feebly tottering (12:12). They were even growing remiss in their attendance on the means of grace (10:25). Discord was not unknown (12:14) and bitterness seemed imminent (5:15). In brief, they were in peril of being "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (3:13).

Our author evidently considered them on the verge of apostasy. They were in danger of "drifting away" from "the things which they had heard" from the apostolic men (2:1-4); of letting slip their confidence and hopeful glorying (3:6); of coming short of the promised rest (4:1); of falling into the same disobedience as the Israelites in the wilderness (4:11), and of shrinking back unto perdition (10:39). The peril which threatened them was a relapse to Judaism. Evidently the founders of the church held the same views as the writer. His lines

of reasoning could only have weight with those who had once professed the same verities; but now there was clearly a tendency in this church to renounce Christianity, and to rest for salvation in Jewish ceremonial. The causes of this retrocession were probably threefold. (1) The stress of persecution. The seventh decade—to the latter half of which our epistle belongs—was one of growing peril. Nero began his nefarious persecution, and Judaism also renewed its virulence after a period of comparative indifference. The death of James the Just (c. 63 A. D.), after making allowance for exaggerations in Hegesippus, indicates the outburst of popular fury. (2) Disappointment at the delay of Christ's second advent. They had built much on the glory of the new kingdom, and on the dignity it would confer on them and their country. They had hoped that the sufferings of the Messiah were but a transient phase of his work, quickly to be forgotten in the glory of his return. Hope deferred made the heart sick. (3) The unbelief of Israel. It was becoming evident that the Jews as a nation did not intend to accept Jesus as the Messiah. The animosity was growing more bitter. It was becoming more difficult to hold to both. Judaism seemed determined to extrude or crush the new faith, and the prospect of a glorious Messianic kingdom grew more remote. It is plain that many Jewish Christians never denied the obligatoriness of Mosaism on themselves as Jews. The *Acts* plainly discloses the loyalty of the first Palestinian Christians towards the law. They did not wish to make it binding on Gentiles (*Acts* 15:28, 29), but they could not throw off the conviction that they themselves must bear its yoke. Besides that, Judaism had such a glorious past. It was undoubtedly of divine origin, and had been attested by such a long row of God-sent men, endowed with superhuman powers, that it was natural that at first a Jew should fail to recognize the relation of the new faith to the old—to discern what in the old faith was transient, and what permanent. In too many cases Christianity had never been more than an appendix to Judaism; and instead of being a "leaven," leavening with new vitality their former faith, it was becoming a mere torpid excrescence. The writer of this epistle saw the danger of this attitude. To use the words of Bishop Westcott, he saw that "the Judaism which was not in due time taken up and transfigured by the gospel must become antagonistic to it. He who remains a Jew outwardly, could not but miss in the end the message of Christ."

Where was this church located? Space forbids the discussion of this subject, but I am strongly disposed to advocate Jerusalem. There

we should be most likely to find an unmixed Jewish church. There, amid the gorgeous ritual of the temple, would the temptation be strongest to cling to sacrificial and priestly ordinances, with mistaken devoutness. There only, would Jews be put in bonds (13:3) by their own countrymen; and there were the clouds of destruction foreseen in the epistle (8:13) about to burst in unparalleled fury. The only weighty objection is that a letter written to Palestine would be written in Aramaic; but this is overcome if we assume that the letter was *written to the Hellenistic community in Jerusalem*. There was even at the outset of Christianity, some feeling between the Hellenists and the rigid Hebrews, which would almost certainly adjust itself by separation. There is undoubtedly a Pauline tinge in the doctrines of this epistle (though we cannot persuade ourselves that Paul was the author; it was written by a younger man, 2:3) and there is a constant implication that it was from this more liberal position that the church had shrunk back. This has led many to maintain that the church was one which Paul had founded; but if we assume that the community was originally composed of men like Stephen, who was accused of "speaking words against the holy place and against the law, and changing the customs of Moses" (Acts 6:13), then the difficulty felt against Jerusalem as the destination of the epistle is removed. That *this* community should seem likely to revert to Judaism might well induce an enthusiastic Grecian Jew who believed in the *new* covenant to expostulate with and instruct this, once promising, but now backsliding, church.

The Epistle.—The most cursory glance at this epistle discloses that its design is, as we have just intimated, twofold: to instruct and to admonish. It is highly argumentative, but every argument is driven home by earnest entreaty: every halting-place in the process of reasoning is filled by fervid admonition to hold fast their confession. The doctrinal and admonitory portions are not interfused, and therefore we will treat them separately. We have shown that it was the influence of the grand historic past of Judaism; the overpowering presence of its gorgeous ritual; the disappointments of the new faith and incident persecutions which led these Hebrews to reckon the loss and the gain, and to ask themselves whether, now that it was becoming impossible to hold to both, they would be wise in abandoning the Jewish faith for that of the crucified Nazarene. The glories of Judaism were undoubted. Even Paul was sensitive to the grandeur of the ancestral religion. In answer to the question, "What advantage hath the Jew?" he is compelled to answer, "Much every way. First of all, they were entrusted

with the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2). "Secondly" is not forthcoming in that connection. To find it we must come to Rom. 9, where Paul recites the dignities and prerogatives of being a Jew. "Whose is the adoption, and the Shekinah-glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service (of the sanctuary) and the promises:" "whose are the fathers" (Rom. 9:4, 5). I have not seen it noted elsewhere, but I would submit that this, or a very similar, catalogue of Jewish privileges was present to our author's mind, and guided the course of the argument of the epistle. Whether the list was one in common use among the Jews, in counting their "gains" (Phil. 3:7), or, the author of Hebrews took it from Romans, we can only speculate; but it is surely remarkable that, with the exception of the substitution of "Moses" in chap. 3 where in our list stands the allied theme of the Shekinah, every item of the list is alluded to in the epistle. The line of argument in Hebrews differs from that of Gal. 3 and Rom. 5, where Paul maintains that the law was a mere side-institution, brought in to reveal the enormity of sin—though even Hebrews goes to Abrahamic times for the typical priest. Our author admits the divine origin of Judaism and highly reveres it, but maintains that it is brought to maturity, and therefore superseded, in Christianity. In abandoning Judaism, therefore, the Christian is only accepting the fruit for the blossom—the perfect for the imperfect. The key-word of the epistle is *τελείωσις* = perfection. Christianity is the complete development of what was in the germ—the substantial reality of the previous shadowy outline; and the writer shows that every one of the boasted privileges of the Jews receives its consummation in Christianity. Did the Jew boast of "*the oracles of God?*" His fragmentary and disjointed revelation is now complete in the person of God's Son. Did the Jew claim to be the son of God? (Exod. 4:22). That "*sonship*" has now for the first time been realized in Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, and he is "bringing many sons to glory." The Sinaitic "*covenant*" is "ready to vanish away" and is succeeded by the new covenant foretold by Jeremiah (chap. 8). "*The giving of the law*" was an imposing scene, but it is quite eclipsed by the assembly of the redeemed in Zion (12:18-24): and the gorgeous ritual "*service*" is altogether superseded by the work of the ideal High Priest, who has entered the veritable tabernacle, after having offered the perfect sacrifice—himself (9:10). The "*promises*" which accompany the new covenant are far better than those of the old (8:6 ff), and if the example of "*the fathers*" is stimulating because of their faith, in Jesus we have a stainless example, and

he is the "perfecter of faith" (11, 12). Thus, Judaism is rudimentary instruction, elaborated and matured in Christianity. We now possess the ideal, which was dimly prefigured before—the antitype of all the types.

The hortatory portions are suggested by the doctrinal. Their keynote is found in 2:3, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation!" The greatness of the salvation suggests time after time the peril of neglecting it. The superiority of the Son to the angels suggests solemn warning in 2:1-4. The fact that the Son guides the house of God in its pilgrim journey, instead of Moses, demands the greater watchfulness against disobedience, like that of Meribah (3:7-4:13). The mention of Melchizedek evokes a rebuke of their obtuseness (chap. 6). The sacrifice of Christ for human sin is rightly made the basis of the most impassioned appeal in Holy Writ (10:19-39), and the contemplation of the gracious privileges of Christians introduces the pathetic exhortations of 12:25 ff.

The final admonition of the epistle is that Judaism must be given up. Its permanent elements are absorbed by Christianity, its transitory elements superseded. Devotion to its ritual is no longer innocent. The new faith gives a complete revelation of God, and the death and mediation of the Son of God more than supply the place of all sacrifices and priestly intercessions. Therefore, just as the sin-offering was eaten without the camp, and as Jesus "suffered without the gate," so the author urges Jewish Christians to come forth altogether from the camp of Judaism, bearing the reproach of Christ (13:9-15). The warning was probably not unheeded, and we may have here the dividing of the ways which led eventually to the existence in Palestine (1) of the catholic church, and (2) of the Ebionite heresy with its imperfect conception of Christ's Sonship and its denial of his High-priestly sacrifice.

ANALYSIS.

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------|--|-------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>The Law perfected nothing.</i> | 7:19 | | <i>A better covenant enacted on</i> | |
| | | | <i>better promises.</i> | 8:6 |

THE REVELATION OF GOD.

| | | | | |
|----------------------------------------------|-----|--|-------------------------------|--------|
| Through the prophets | 1:1 | | In his Son, "visible counter- | |
| | | | part of the Divine Selfhood" | 1:2, 3 |
| By means of angels | 2:2 | | By him whom angels worship | 1:4-14 |
| Warning based on grandeur of the Revelation. | | | | 2:1-4 |

THE ADOPTION OF SONS.

| | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Promised, but hitherto unreal- ized. Man not lord of crea- tion, nor crowned, etc. | 2: 5-8 | Christ has risen to ideal son- ship along the path of sorrow. Exalted, he is leading sons to glory | 2: 9-18 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|

THE LEADER ON LIFE'S PILGRIMAGE.

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|------------|
| Moses, faithful as servant | 3: 1-6 | Jesus, the Son is leading his | |
| Joshua, who did not give rest | 4: 8 | people to the Sabbath-rest | 4: 9 |
| Warning not to be like Israel in the wilderness | | | 3: 7-4: 13 |

THE SERVICE OF GOD.

1. THE HIGH PRIEST.

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------------|----------|------------------------------|------------|
| Considerate with ignorant | 5: 2 | Sympathetic | 4: 15 |
| Compassed with infirmity | 5: 2 | Tempted, yet without sin | 4: 15 |
| Must offer for his own sin | 5: 3 | Has not such need | (7: 27) |
| Called to office by God | 5: 4 | The Son called to priesthood | 5: 5, 6 |
| | | Qualified through suffering | 5: 7-10 |
| (Reproof and warning on lack of | | Christian insight | 5: 2-6: 12 |
| God's promises confirmed by oath | | | 6: 13-20) |
| Inferior to Melchizedek | | Resemblances to Melchizedek | 7: 1-3 |
| a. Levi paid tithes to him | 7: 4-10 | | |
| b. Insecurity of tenure | 7: 11-13 | Eternal permanence | 7: 14-17 |
| c. Appointed without oath | 7: 21 | Appointed with an oath | 7: 20-23 |
| d. Priests mortal | 7: 23 | Abideth forever | 7: 22-25 |
| Résumé of Christ's qualification as Priest | | | 7: 26-28 |

2. THE TABERNACLE.

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| A cosmical tabernacle | 9: 1 | The veritable heavenly tabernacle | 8: 2 |
| Pitched by man | 8: 2 | Pitched by God | 8: 2 |
| Its furniture material | 9: 2-5 | Contains the archetypes | 8: 5 |
| Holiest is entered once a year | 9: 7 | Christ entered once for all | 8: 11, 12 |
| The holiest closely veiled | 9: 8-10 | The holiest now open | (10: 19, 20) |

THE COVENANTS AND THE PROMISES. (Digression).

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------|----------------------------|-----------|
| The old covenant faulty | 8: 7 | The better covenant | 8: 6 |
| (Law written on tables) | | Law written on hearts | 8: 10 |
| (Knowledge taught by priests) | | Knowledge universal | 8: 11 |
| ("Passing over" of sins Rom. 3: 25) | | Thorough forgiveness | 8: 12 |
| Dedicated with blood (Exod. 24) | | Mediated by Christ's death | 9: 15-17 |
| | 9: 18-22 | Eternal | 10: 14-18 |
| Waxing aged | 8: 13 | | |